

EU Frontiers

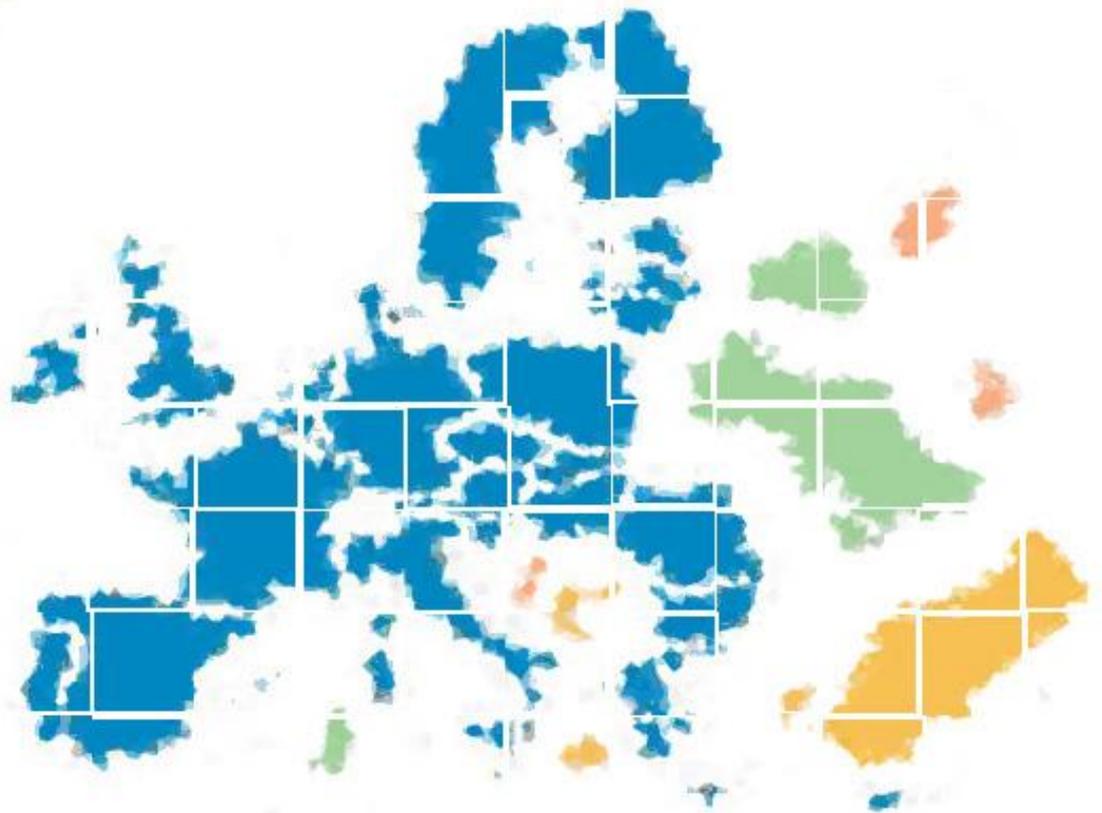
Policy Paper

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From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

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Center for European Neighborhood Studies

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From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in
Central and South Eastern Europe

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Introduction: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

By Łukasz Janulewicz

Cooperation among the countries of the Eastern half of the European Union is nothing new. Shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Central European Initiative was formed between Austria, Hungary, Italy and Yugoslavia. In 1991, the Visegrad Group followed after being founded among Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. More recently, regional cooperation has experienced a revival and several new formats have been launched, like the Three Seas Initiative, the Bucharest 9, the Slavkov Triangle or the Varna 4. This process has also brought up new questions about the role of such formats. On the one hand, in the increasingly complex EU decision-making process, such groups can play an important role in preparing and pre-negotiating major EU legislation. On the other hand, some of these formats have an overlapping membership, which is provoking debates if the rise of one format might come at the expense of another. The political climate in Central Europe has also provoked concerns about other roles these groups might take. On paper the Three Seas Initiative, for example, is a framework for economic cooperation and infrastructure investment. But it has raised questions about being a potential political counterweight to "Brussels". The V4's ongoing tensions with other member states and EU institutions has provoked similar questions, in how far the group might become a conservative coalition within the EU.

It is by no means only a Central European phenomenon and also has a long tradition in other parts of Europe. The notable forerunner is the BeNeLux Group already created in 1948. Another prominent example is the Nordic Council, founded in 1952, which brings together the countries of Scandinavia in one of the most formally established regional cooperation frameworks. Finally, the Baltic states, which themselves are part of Central European cooperation through the Three Seas Initiative, for example, also have their own cooperation format and close cooperation with the Nordic countries.

Confirming the topicality of the issue, Kai-Olaf Lang and Nicolai von Ondarza have recently published a study of the 'minilateralisms' within the EU, in which they provide an overview of the different types, functions and structures to be found among the 14 different groups of countries they identified within the EU.¹ Our purpose here is to provide a more regionally embedded view on the issue together with more country-specific perspectives. The papers collected in this publication are based on the presentations of the authors at the conference of the same title, held on April 13th 2018 in

¹ Lang, Kai-Olaf and von Ondarza, Nicolai (2018), Minilateralismen in der EU: Chancen und Risiken der innereuropäischen Diplomatie, SWP Aktuell 7/Januar 2018, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/minilateralismen-in-der-eu-chancen-und-risiken-der-innereuropaeischen-diplomatie/>

From 'Visegrad Four' to 'Varna Four': The rise and role of regional cooperation in
Central and South Eastern Europe

Budapest at Central European University and co-organised by the Center for European Neighborhood Studies and the Budapest Office of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

The first part of this publication is devoted to a broader perspective on regional cooperation not just in Central Europe, but also in the Baltic States and South Eastern Europe. The four countries of the Visegrad Group, located at the heart of the Eastern half of the European Union, remain the mainstay of regional cooperation and most new formats contain at least one V4 country. Zsuzsanna Végh's chapter thus reviews the perceptions of and approaches to regional cooperation among the four Visegrad countries. Vasile Rotaru brings the role of the Eastern Flank for regional cooperation to our attention in his chapter with a nod to Romania's role in the process. He also investigates the potential of regional cooperation as a divisive factor within the EU. The first part is concluded by Piret Kuusik's chapter that introduces us to the approach of the Baltic states to regional cooperation and showcases their focus on cooperation with the Nordic, not Central European states.

Part two turns its attention back to the Visegrad countries and their potential role as a conservative coalition within the European Union. The notion of conservatism and its role in Central European politics is first introduced by Igor Merheim-Eyre, whose chapter highlights the problematic nature of applying this label to the V4 countries and concludes that the V4 are thus better described as a 'part-time reactionary alliance'. Then, Veronika Józwiak and Zuzana Stuchlíková review the Polish and Czech potential for such a conservative coalition in their respective chapters. The former argues that despite some V4 induced tensions the 'conservative coalition' often serves as a pretext in Western Europe and endangers EU unity and risks a lasting East-West divide. The latter argues highlights that the existence of multiple overlapping formats complicates the agreement on joint positions and thus makes the emergence of a fixed 'conservative coalition' unlikely'.

A region of changing visions: Regional cooperation in Central Europe

By Zsuzsanna Végh²

Cooperation among the countries of Central Europe has been the norm ever since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. A multitude of more or less institutionalized regional cooperation formats has sprung up over the past two and a half decades setting either broad and general targets or focusing on more concrete sectoral goals. Many of these formats have faded or lost relevance over time, but a few – like the Visegrad Group or CEFTA, even if with a new membership in the latter case – has survived, and new initiatives – like the Slavkov Triangle or the Three Seas Initiative – still enter the scene nowadays. The present essay discusses the importance and role of regional cooperation from the point of view of the four states situated at the very core of Central Europe (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and assesses the evolution of visions and narratives surrounding it.

For Central European countries, building alliances with regional partners follows naturally from their size, relative power in Europe and geographic location. While shared geography can often translate into shared interests, for small states building regional alliances is especially important as it can significantly increase their visibility, bargaining power, and help them punch above their weight on the international scene. Furthermore, in such a complex system like the European Union, cooperation and alliance building is generally considered important by most participating actors. In the case of the four Central European states, the EU Coalition Explorer survey of the European Council on Foreign Relations indicated that most stakeholders believe that coalitions between member states are very important to get things done in the EU.³

These countries often consider having interests in common especially with other Central European partners and contact them the most frequently or even for first on EU matters. While Czechia and Hungary focus their attention to the narrower region, Poland appears to have a broader outlook: Polish stakeholders consider their country’s interests being shared by a wider range of regional partners, including not only the core of Central Europe, but also the Baltic states and even the geographically farther located Romania. Based on these assessments, therefore, it appears that regional partners would indeed form a logical base for cooperation within the EU for the four core Central European countries. While the shared interests predispose them to cooperate, the role of regional cooperation in their foreign policies has gone through various phases as they sought their new place in Europe after the

² Researcher, European University Viadrina. The views expressed here are those of the author.

³ “Overall, how important are coalitions between member states to get thing done in the EU?”. Question 15 of the EU Coalition Explorer, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017. Available at <http://www.ecfr.eu/eucoalitionexplorer>. Last accessed: May 9, 2018.

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in
Central and South Eastern Europe

regime change and in the European Union after their accession. Hence, the recent history of regional cooperation in Central Europe, regardless whether it was characterized by ideologically and politically driven or more ad hoc, thematically driven phases, is indivisible from the broader European context.

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Shared interests with...⁴	Slovakia (26%) Poland (22%) Hungary (15%)	Poland (24%) Slovakia (22%) Czechia (21%)	Hungary (13%) <i>Lithuania (12%)</i> <i>Estonia (11%)</i> <i>Romania (11%)</i> Slovakia (9%) Czechia (6%)	n/a
First or most contact with...⁵	Slovakia (25%) <i>Germany (23%)</i> Poland (20%) Hungary (14%)	Poland (29%) Slovakia (21%) Czechia (18%)	Hungary (18%) <i>Germany (16%)</i> Czechia (13%) <i>UK (11%)</i> Slovakia (9%)	n/a

The period preceding the four countries’ accession to the European Union in 2004 was dominated by two regional cooperation formats, the Visegrad Group and the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA), both of which were built around a common vision that could later facilitate their survival. While the Visegrad Group was established upon a shared historical tradition and the desire for a joint European future, CEFTA was a functional cooperation that sought to facilitate that the four countries achieve that future. After having done so, the Visegrad Group could live on within the European Union since this new context was compatible with the identity of the Group, while CEFTA was maintained outside the EU by new members seeking a similar European future like the four acceding countries. As opposed to the politically driven pre-accession period, regional cooperation in the subsequent decade remained relatively ad hoc and policy-focused as the four countries were sought to build a new identity and find their role in the framework of the European Union. On occasion, where interests overlapped, the countries could successfully advocate, for example, for the launch of the EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative, or could bargain for their interests to be taken into

⁴ “In your view or experience, which other EU member states generally share many of your own country’s interests and preferences on EU policies? (select up to five)”. Question 2 of the EU Coalition Explorer. *Op.cit.*

⁵ “In your view or experience, which other governments would your own government generally contact first and/or most on EU matters? (select up to five)”. Question 1 of the EU Coalition Explorer. *Op.cit.*

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

consideration, like in the framework of their ‘Friends of Cohesion’ lobby-group during the negotiations of the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework. However, the countries felt no pressure to institutionalize their cooperation or formulate joint positions in all policy areas, thus the Visegrad Cooperation was not hampered by differences existing among its members on a multitude of questions.

The year 2015 with the refugee and migration crisis, however, was a watershed in the cooperation among the four countries, hallmarked by the political revival of the Visegrad Group. On the back of the Visegrad countries’ anti-migration rhetoric, the vision of an intergovernmental Europe of strong nation states climbed to the fore and reshaped perceptions about Central Europe EU-wide. While in its function this new vision was just as emancipatory as the vision of ‘returning to Europe’ in the 1990s and early 2000s in so far as it also sought to put the Central European countries on equal footing with Western Europe, in its consequences regarding the identity it in turn assigned to the region, it became fundamentally different. The pre-accession vision emphasized similarities, belonging together, and developed a unifying narrative. The post-2015 vision, on the contrary, is one of unique distinctiveness, division from and confrontation with the rest of the EU over the question of identity and sovereignty. Further, while the first was indeed shared in the political leadership of all four states (in Slovakia, after Vladimír Mečiar lost power in 1998), after the initial momentum, cracks have already appeared in the Visegrad-wide support of the second on the underlying layer of policy decisions behind the façade of joint declarations about migration and the future of Europe. On the one hand, recent policy responses concerning the very migration policy already reflect different strategies among the Visegrad states, on the other hand, several EU-related choices of half of the countries, namely Czechia and Slovakia, question their actual commitment to the new, allegedly joint vision.

Although the Visegrad countries all remain opposed to the most controversial elements of the EU’s refugee and asylum policy, like the relocation quota or resettlement, and continue to advocate for protecting the EU’s external borders and addressing the crisis at its roots, they are no longer in full unison concerning the extent of their opposition as indicated by the ongoing infringement procedure against Czechia, Hungary and Poland concerning the lack of implementation of the September 2015 relocation quota decision. Even though it was initially Slovakia that challenged the Council decision together with Hungary at the Court of Justice of the EU, it accepted the Court’s rebuttal that came in 2017. Hungary, which had always been the harshest critic of the policy, however, has not backed down and refuses to implement the decision nonetheless. In this choice, it was joined by Czechia that had until then been seen by European partners in a somewhat more favorable light in this regard, and by Poland where the Law and Justice government turned over the previous Civic Platform government’s decision to accept the quota as soon as it entered power.

More importantly, while Hungary and Poland trumpet a cultural counter-revolution, the strengthening of nation states in Europe and a revival of the

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

continent’s Judeo-Christian roots, Czechia and Slovakia appear to be more reluctant to embrace this image of the future, especially as talks about the potential reform of the EU and the negotiations of the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework are coming to the forefront. From the point of political calculation, it is understandable that Prague and Bratislava are cautious whether they want to be grouped together with Budapest and Warsaw, whose revolutionary attitude and conscious efforts in dismantling democracy are viewed more and more critically by Western partners as attests the Article 7 procedure launched against Poland and the European Parliament’s investigation into the state of democracy in Hungary. In this context it was no surprise that then-Prime Minister Fico clearly stated in summer 2017 that he saw Slovakia’s future with the core of the EU. In fact, the country is already more tied to the core than any of its Visegrad partners due to its membership in the Eurozone. Czechia on the other hand has been re-investing in its partnerships with Germany and Austria since 2015 on the side of the V4 cooperation, however, it is still unclear where the country would go if Prime Minister Andrej Babis manages to form a government in 2018. Nevertheless, both countries’ decision to the European Public Prosecutor’s Office – opposed by Poland and Hungary – show that they have a different understanding of adherence to European values and principles than the latter two.

What makes these appearing cracks more significant than the ever-existing differences in the Visegrad Group is that they are not only about various policy preferences and sectoral priorities, but touch on the very core of what the Visegrad Group stands for, how it sees its place in the EU and what it wants to achieve. That is, these touch on central aspects of the Group’s identity and mission. Whereas not all policy differences have to necessarily be overcome for a cooperation to function, if there is disagreement on the driving vision that does undermine the political foundation and creates not differences, but divisions. The ongoing Hungarian Visegrad Presidency is working hard to maintain the united image of the V4 including its counter-revolutionary edge. The big test for this current vision, and for the Group as such, will be how the upcoming Slovak and Czech presidencies between July 2018 and June 2020 carry on with the Polish and Hungarian narrative. Considering Bratislava’s and Prague’s cautious pull back over the past year, a shift back to a Visegrad Cooperation based more on policy interests and less on visions is in the cards.

Dividing the EU? The intra-union regional cooperation on the Eastern flank

By Vasile Rotaru

Since 2015 the Eastern half of the EU has witnessed an increasing regional preoccupation for new cooperation initiatives. At the end of January 2015, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria laid the foundation of the Slavkov Triangle (S3) – a forum of cooperation meant to develop common infrastructure, strengthen energy safety and to organize joint consultations prior to EU summits. In November the same year, Romanian and Polish Presidents proposed the creation of the Bucharest 9 Initiative (B9) that includes nine EU and NATO members (the three Baltic states, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) with the aim of improving stability and security at the Euro-Atlantic Eastern borders. In August 2016, Croatian and Polish Presidents initiated a north-south axis of cooperation among EU countries meant to strengthen Central and East European economic cooperation, particularly in the areas of transport and energy – the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). It comprises the countries between the Adriatic, Black and Baltic seas, including all B9 members plus Austria, Croatia and Slovenia. One year later, in October 2017, the prime-ministers of Romania and Greece and the Presidents of Bulgaria and Serbia established in Varna (Bulgaria) a form of cooperation modelled on the Visegrad Group (V4). The main purpose of this format is to give more weight to the four countries in European politics and it is to be noticed that comparing to the previously mentioned regional initiatives, Varna 4 is the only one that includes a non-EU member (Serbia).

In general, these regional initiatives have broad goals and duplicate each other, 'older' regional initiatives (e.g. the V4) or EU's own policies such as Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) or Energy Security Strategy. In addition, some of them have raised concerns among the 'older' EU members that they may undermine the unity of the union, because the initiatives have been politically pushed by leaders that deviated recently from the *acquis communautaire* (e.g. the governments of Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic) and because of the suspicion that increasing US attention towards the Eastern regional initiatives may seek to weaken Europe and to reduce the EU's influence in global politics.⁶ The 3SI has been of particular attention in this regard.

The 3SI, the best known among recent regional initiatives due to US President Trump presence at its Warsaw summit in 2017, made top German politicians regard it as a bid to divide Europe and weaken Germany's

⁶ Jakovčić, Ivan (2017), quoted in Total Croatia News, „Germany Angry with Croatia Due to the Three Seas Initiative”, 20 July, available at: <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/20560-the-economist-germany-angry-with-croatia-due-to-the-three-seas-initiative>.

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

leverage over its neighbours.⁷ This contradicts Berlin’s strategic interest to be well anchored both in the Western and Eastern Europe. Suspicions were further fuelled by Poland’s invitation of German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel to speak at the Global Forum in Warsaw during Trump’s 2017 visit but not to participate to the 3SI summit the same day, and also by growing US interest in exporting LNG to Europe via Poland. This could help Warsaw to fulfil its ambition to become a regional energy hub at the expense of Germany in a moment when Berlin is confronted with more uncertainties about the planned Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Yet, along with these concerns, one should not ignore the context of the inception of the post-2015 regional integration projects. Russia’s aggressive actions in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood have put the Eastern and Central EU countries on guard. Many of them share a border with Ukraine and/or Russia and are exposed to great energy vulnerability due to their dependence on Russian gas imports. Then, the traditionally good relations of ‘old’ Europe with Russia (e.g. the special relationship of Germany, Italy and France) and French President Macron’s vision of an EU of concentric circles have irked many ‘newer’ EU members. It was in this context, that ‘newer’ EU members started to coalesce and to look more at the US and NATO as the main security guarantors.

The division between ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU members, that joined the union after 2004, has been a hot topic in Brussels lately. Even EU’s president Jean Claude Juncker drew attention in his 2017 State of union speech that “Europe must breathe with both lungs. Otherwise our continent will struggle for air”.⁸ Thus, whether these recent regional integration initiatives in Central East Europe would deepen the rift between Western and Eastern Europe came as natural question.

The interest of ‘sovereignist’ Poland and Hungary in regional initiatives raises legitimate suspicions among bureaucrats in Brussels and diplomats in Berlin. The conservative patriotism of Warsaw and the nationalist populism of Budapest contradict the core democratic principles of the EU. Both Poland and Hungary have defied the EU institutions repeatedly, particularly on migration and have promoted anti-West-European rhetoric. Neither is the current Czech Prime Minister, Andrej Babis, a great supporter of the EU, who despite lacking ideological underpinning does not prioritize either the adoption of the euro or deeper European integration. In addition, the endorsement of some of the regional initiatives, like 3SI, by President Trump – who has constructed his political discourse on conservative values, American primacy, sovereignty and national pride – has fuelled the worries in Brussels.

⁷ The Economist (2017), „Germany fears Donald Trump will divide Europe”, 15 July, available at: <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21725025-angela-merkel-troubled-presidents-chumminess-putin-and-poland-germany-fears-donald>.

⁸ Juncker, Jean-Claude (2017), State of the Union Address, 13 September, available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm.

From 'Visegrad Four' to 'Varna Four': The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

However, Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic are not able to direct the regional initiatives at their will. The three 'EU-headaches' are balanced in these regional projects by pro-EU Romania, Slovakia, or Austria. Romania is the second biggest country among the Central East European EU members both in terms of territory and population. With no Eurosceptic political party and a population with pro-European feelings, Bucharest is committed to EU integration and looks for a greater role in EU politics while presenting NATO as the main security guarantor. In Slovakia, migration fed anti-EU rhetoric, however, Bratislava is pursuing deeper Eurozone integration and seeks greater rapprochement with the EU core. Finally, Austria, an 'old' EU member, could act as a link between Western and Eastern Europe. Thus, while Poland could try to politicize the 3SI or B9 or to leverage US interest in the region at the expense of Brussels, Warsaw would have to face the opposition of its partners. In fact, Poland has already experienced this. Its proposal to create a permanent secretariat of 3SI was rejected by the rest of the partners; Austria and the Czech Republic deliberately avoid to participate at the 3SI summits at the presidential level in order not to 'politicise' the initiative; while Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia have been cautious with any developments that could spoil their relationship with Brussels or Berlin.

Besides being balanced when it comes to anti- and pro-EU sentiments of its members, the post-2015 regional initiatives have in fact a beneficent role for the unity and security of Europe. On one side they focus Brussels' attention towards the Eastern borders – an area of particular importance for the EU's security in the context of Russia's aggressive actions in neighbouring Ukraine. These regional initiatives also bring more coherence among the newer EU members that would strengthen the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Comparing to previous projects aimed at drawing EU's attention to its Eastern neighbours (the Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership), both the B9 and 3SI initiatives have involved from the beginning the entire Eastern flank of the EU with Poland and Romania as regional leaders. On the other side, all Central East European countries oppose the idea of multi-speed or concentric circles, promoted by 'old' EU members - which could perpetuate divisions and undermine solidarity among EU members. These regional projects put great pressure on initiatives envisaging an EU with concentric circles, instead encouraging further integration of 'newer' EU countries and equality among member states.

Regional integration 'fever' in itself should not be worrisome. It is not a new phenomenon in Central Eastern Europe. The 1990s also witnessed the creation of a plethora of organisations and structures of cooperation: The Central European Initiative (1989), the Visegrad Group (1991), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (1992), the South East European Cooperation Process (1996), the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (1999). Those initiatives have played an important positive role in the Euro-Atlantic integration of the former communist countries and on regional economic development. By analogy, B9 and 3SI in particular could thus not only increase the security and economic cooperation in the eastern half of the EU but could also help

From 'Visegrad Four' to 'Varna Four': The rise and role of regional cooperation in
Central and South Eastern Europe

the most pro-Euro-Atlantic countries in the immediate vicinity (Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia) to get closer to both EU and NATO. Of course, on the condition that B9 and 3SI are open to accept these non-EU and non-NATO new members. Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia have already signed comprehensive association agreements with the EU that imply not only enhanced economic cooperation but also mutual foreign policy and security obligations;⁹ and the precedent of the 2010 Azeri-Turkish Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support that implies reciprocal support in case of military attack or aggression against either of them clearly illustrates the possibility of enhanced cooperation at the security level between a NATO and a non-NATO member.

⁹ Rotaru, V., Umland, A. (2017), „How Romania and Poland can strengthen NATO and the EU”, in Foreign Affairs, 10 November, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-europe/2017-11-10/how-romania-and-poland-can-strengthen-nato-and-eu?cid=soc-fb-rdr>.

Nordic-Baltic Cooperation in the EU: Revitalised by President Macron?

By Piret Kuusik

On 6th of May 2018, the Finance Ministers of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden made a statement in relation to the future architecture of the European Monetary Union (EMU).¹⁰ Outlining six clear and sturdy points, the Northern countries of the European Union sketched a picture where they see the EMU and the EU heading in the coming years. Stressing inclusivity of small states in the EU, action at national level, need for full compliance with EU rules, accountability to the public and member states ownership of reforms, the Nordic-Baltic countries positioned themselves in the debate about the future of the European project. In this policy brief, I argue that President Macron's vision for Europe and call for active German-Franco relationship in Europe may motivate the Nordic-Baltic countries to overcome their differences and cooperate more actively as a regional block in the EU. I first discuss the history and nature of Nordic-Baltic cooperation, then I narrow my focus to looking at NB6 cooperation. I conclude by discussing how President Macron's vision of the EU contrasts with the Nordic-Baltic vision of the EU and thus may ignite the Nordic-Baltic countries to cooperate more actively in the future.

Cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic Sea region

Arguably, the Nordic-Baltic region is the most integrated in Europe. The Nordic and the Baltic countries have formed both in separate cooperative formats, but also in shared structures. Nordic countries- Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark- cooperate in the format of Nordic Council, while the Baltics- Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania- come together in the Baltic Council of Ministers format. Of the two, the Nordic Council is more organized and institutionalized, while the Baltic Council of Ministers is in its nature more ad hoc and issue specific.

The Nordic and Baltic countries also cooperate in shared institutions such as Nordic-Baltic 8 (NB8) and Nordic-Baltic 6 (NB6), the difference being that NB6 excludes non-EU member states. Both formats meet on an ad hoc basis, often overlapping with Nordic Council activities. Additionally, there are numerous other regional frameworks based on specific issues and membership. For example, NORDEFECO brings together states cooperating in matters of defence and security while the Council of the Baltic Sea States additionally includes Poland, Germany and Russia.

¹⁰ Ministry of Finance, Finland (2018) "European finance ministers' joint statement on the development of the Economic and Monetary Union", *Ministry of Finance Finland*, 6 March 2018, Available at: http://vm.fi/en/article/-/asset_publisher/valtiovarainministerien-yhteiskannanotto-euroopan-talous-ja-rahaliiton-kehittamisesta (Accessed: 18.04.2018)

The states in the Nordic-Baltic region have been meeting and coordinating their work from the beginning of the 1990s. Nordic countries support to Baltic states was essential in the early years after re-gaining independence by the Baltic states. After 2004, when the three Baltic states joined EU and NATO, cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic countries slowed down. For one, there was no clear-cut purpose for future cooperation, like Baltic states membership bid to NATO and EU was before, and secondly, the Baltic states' focus turned to finding their feet in EU and NATO.

However, 2014 was a year of great change in the Baltic Sea region. Russia's aggressive behaviour in the region and in Ukraine increased global attention to the region and highlighted the need for a serious result-based cooperation. Security and defence developments in the region have become a central issue driving the cooperation between the Baltic and Nordic countries. Moreover, changing dynamics in the EU and discussions about Europe's future have become another reason for Nordic-Baltic countries to work together.

History tells us that the cooperation among the Nordic or Baltic and Nordic-Baltic states is not as smooth as one may assume.¹¹ While the Nordic countries have a strong brand and they cooperate on issues of low-politics, their different attitudes towards European integration have hindered their stronger cooperation in the EU. To begin with, Norway and Iceland have stayed out of the EU. Denmark is a member of the EU but has negotiated four opt-outs from the Maastricht Treaty and is not a member of the Eurozone. Sweden is more in favour of European integration than Denmark, but at the same time has also stayed out of the Eurozone. Finland is most pro-European of them all and is a member of the Eurozone. The Baltic states agree more in regards to European integration than the Nordics, generally favouring deeper integration. However, Baltic cooperation tends to be driven by specific regional issues, where interests overlap and results are visible. Therefore, Nordic-Baltic cooperation carries great potential, however, because of differences in their views towards European integration and the *modus operandi* of their cooperation, Nordic-Baltic cooperation is less natural as one may assume.

Nordic-Baltic 6

For this paper, I focus on the Nordic-Baltic 6 framework that is made of Nordic and Baltic countries, who are members of the European Union.¹² The NB6 functions inside the broader NB8 format. Additionally, to NB8 get-togethers, often before or after the Nordic Council or at the annual meeting, the NB6 Heads of Government meet in the eve or morning of European Council session. Foreign Ministers meet in the eve before Foreign Affairs Council and General Affairs Council. The ad-hoc and consultative nature of NB8 has spilled over to NB6 format, thus allowing for a great deal of flexibility. NB6 meetings often serve as an opportunity to map each other's positions, consult and test one's arguments before presenting them to the

¹¹ Tiilikainen Teliija and Korhonen Kaisa (eds.) (2011) "Norden- Making a Difference?" FIIA report 29, Available at: https://storage.googleapis.com/upi-live/2017/01/fiia_29_web.pdf (Accessed: 18.04.2018)

¹² Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Council.¹³ Participation in joint projects, mostly in the NB8 format, is voluntary with opting-in or out according to individual government’s liking.

It is important to note that the UK has played an important role in NB6 cooperation, by bringing them together and rallying the six countries behind a particular policy. At the same time, the UK acted as a megaphone and defender of free-trade and liberal economic principles. Thus, allowing like-minded Nordic-Baltic countries to take a backseat on discussions about economics, trade and the inner workings of the EU. Now, with UK exiting the EU, Nordic-Baltic countries are left without a lead singer.

President Macron’s vision for the European Union

I began this policy brief by referring to the statement made by NB6 Finance Ministers on the architecture of the EMU. The reform and future of the Eurozone is one of the central issues in the EU, partly because it is also about the future of the European project.¹⁴ The arrival of pro-European French President Emmanuel Macron has livened the debate, and I argue, has somewhat energized the NB6 cooperation in the EU. In his “Sorbonne speech”, President Macron outlined an ambitious vision for EU’s future.¹⁵ He said that Europe should move forward based on principles of efficiency, further integration, common risk sharing and allowing willing member states to move forward with further integration and thus creating the so-called multispeed Europe. These principles are contrary to what the Nordic-Baltic countries wish to see as the future of the European integration.

President Macron’s call for multispeed Europe, where the “core Europe” will be the Eurozone member countries is not acceptable for Sweden and Denmark. They are not members of the Eurozone and have been apprehensive about fostering European integration through market creation from the beginning.¹⁶ Therefore, the idea of multispeed Europe based on the Eurozone is opposed by Sweden and Denmark since it will side-line them from EU’s decision-making. Similarly, despite being members of the Eurozone, the three Baltic states and Finland advocate an inclusive Europe. The Baltic states put great importance on regained sovereignty and are not so easily ready to let go of decision-making power. Also, due to the limited

¹³ Ilze Ruse (2015) “Nordic Cooperation in the EU Council: Does institutional embeddedness matter?” in Howard Gron, Caroline, Nedergaard, Peter and Wivel Anders (2015) *The Nordic Countries and the EU: Still the other European Community?* London and New York: Routledge

¹⁴ “Critical issues and the future of the EU”, Government Offices of Sweden, 23 March 2018, Available at: <http://www.government.se/articles/2018/03/critical-issues-and-the-future-of-the-eu/> (Accessed: 18.04.2018)

¹⁵ “Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron - Full text / English version”, *Ouest-France*, 26 September 2017, Available at: <http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html> (Accessed: 18.04.2018)

¹⁶ Mads Dagnis Jensen and Peter Nedergaard (2015) “Market integration in Europe and the Nordic countries: The ambivalent path dependency” in Howard Gron, Caroline, Nedergaard, Peter and Wivel Anders (2015) *The Nordic Countries and the EU: Still the other European Community?* London and New York: Routledge

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

capacity of resources, small and medium states may not be able to fully join in all activities even if they wish to.¹⁷

President Macron calls for a strong Franco-German leadership and it is likely to be true that it will make the EU more efficient. However, the trade-off between efficient and inclusive leadership worries the Nordic-Baltic countries, as it risks side-lining other smaller and medium-sized member states from EU’s decision making.

Finally, President Macron’s call for a common budget and European finance minister has made the NB6 countries cautious. Conservative in their economic policies, the NB6 countries argue that the focus must be put on completing the banking union, improving compliance with the budget rules and responsibility must stay with the member states. This argument comes from a strong tradition of liberal economic philosophy- favouring free trade and stressing the importance of competition in the single market. This goes against France’s push for further economic integration in the EU with a common Finance Minister and shared financial responsibility.

Conclusion

The primary objective of European integration for the Nordic-Baltic countries is the unity of the 27. Therefore, President Macron’s ambitious plan for European integration, where the bigger countries call the shots is in direct contrast to the NB6’s idea of a united and inclusive European Union. Thus, allowing me to argue that President Macron’s active pursuit of his vision in the backdrop of Brexit may trigger a more active Nordic-Baltic cooperation.

It is not clear yet, where the European project will be heading in the coming years. However, it seems that Nordic-Baltic countries may be in the luck since Germany favours the Nordic-Baltic stance on the Eurozone and Chancellor Merkel has stressed that her aim is to keep the unity of the EU, meaning- to be inclusive of small member states.¹⁸ However, the struggle continues and it remains to be seen how successful President Macron will be in implementing his European vision.

History tells us that Nordic-Baltic cooperation tends to be more coordinative and consultative within the region than delivering results that affect dynamics within the EU. Nevertheless, President Macron has reminded the Nordic-Baltic states that though being different, they have a lot in common. Strength lies in numbers and their already established networks and cooperation can serve as a useful tool in standing for their principles in the EU. The European project has big steps ahead and here the Nordic-Baltic countries may use the power of numbers and cooperate deliberately to influence the future course of the European project.

¹⁷ Hiski Haukkala, Tobias Etzold and Kristi Raik (2017) “The Northern European Member States” in Amelia Hadfield, Ian Manners and Richard G. Whitman (2017) *Foreign Policies of EU Member States*, London and New York: Routledge

¹⁸ Guy Chazan (2018) “Angela Merkel prefers EU27 bus to 2-seat Franco-German car”, *Financial Times*, 3 April 2018, Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/2126b424-31ce-11e8-ac48-10c6fdc22f03> (Accessed: 18.04.2018)

The V4: Central Europe’s new Holy Alliance?

By Igor Merheim-Eyre

Introduction

The four Visegrad countries (V4) of Central-Eastern Europe are often described as having ‘conservative’ or ‘conservative nationalist’ governments, working together as a ‘conservative alliance’ against what is perceived as a Brussels orthodoxy imposing its agenda upon sovereign states. As this paper seeks to show, despite societal tendencies towards conservatism in all four countries (an analysis of which goes beyond the scope of this paper), the four governments (to some extent, with the exception of Poland) do not demonstrate ideological traits in the conservative tradition, and attempts to define the V4 as a conservative alliance over-simplify the complex nature of both regional and intra-state dynamics. Instead, the V4 governments provide a mixture of ideological traits, while blurring political concepts, making either a shared or a coherent ideological vision increasingly difficult.

In this regard the V4 is, at best, a part-time reactionary alliance, standing ‘against’ rather than ‘for’ any set of values or traditions, uniting only when their interests happen to meet rather than seeking to provide a political vision for the region or the European Union (EU). To this end, despite Hungarian government’s attempts at creating an ‘illiberal state’ and Polish calls for a ‘counter-revolution’, the V4 have not shaped a conservative political narrative in the EU, be it on the relations between the EU and Member States’ institutions, or between the Member States’ institutions and their respective societies.

Defining Conservatism

To quote Quintin Hogg, the former Chairman of the British Conservative Party, conservatism is ‘not so much a philosophy as an attitude¹⁹. In this regard, conservatism is notoriously hard to define lacking, for example, the universalist and dialectic tendencies that tend to unite the different strands of Liberalism or Marxism. Nevertheless, there are three principles that are traditionally present in conservative thought.

First, conservatism begins with a mixture of ‘moderate skepticism’ (so often found in the works of David Hume, Adam Smith or Edmund Burke) and the belief in preserving the social order and customs. It is not that conservatives reject change but, stemming from Burke’s observation of the chaos and violence caused by the French Revolution, change should rather be evolutionary, avoiding the risk of making things worse²⁰ or, as the British conservative thinker Roger Scruton, puts it:

¹⁹ Hogg (Baron Hailsham of St Marylebone), Quintin (1959). *The Conservative Case*; Penguin Books London

²⁰Hazony, Yoram. ‘The Dark side of the Enlightenment’; *The Wall Street Journal* (Accessed 6/4/2018) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-dark-side-of-the-enlightenment->

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

‘Conservatism starts from a sentiment ‘that good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created. This is especially true of the good things that come to us as collective assets: peace, freedom, law, civility, public spirit, the security of property and family life’²¹

Second, conservatives stress the need to cultivate a sense of public duty²². To this end, conservatives’ understanding of ‘the good life’ is not about satisfying interests of the individual, or bowing to her/his materialistic wants, but it is more about the preservation of the social order and institutions which have emerged and organically evolved over time, and through which our identity flows. It is in the need to safeguard the social order and the institutions that our allegiance and public duty come to fore.

Third, conservatives are suspicious of top-down interference, and of government imposition, and rather believe in the need for a society to grow and shape from below²³, based on existing customs and traditions. Top-down government interference, on the other hand, imposes upon the civil society, quashing individual initiative, creativity, and a sense of duty or, as Scruton puts it more elaborately:

‘[T]he truth in conservatism is that civil society can be killed from above, but it grows from below. It grows through the associative impulse of human beings, who create civil associations that are not purpose-driven but places of freely sustained order’.²⁴

The V4 as a reactionary alliance

Delving into the basic principles under-pinning conservatism calls into question the perception of the V4 as a conservative alliance, while highlighting the countries’ complex political scene. The Social Democrat-led government of the former Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka did not seek a conservative programme despite the presence of the Christian Democratic Union (KDU-CSL), and the ANO party of PM Andrej Babiš (*a former collaborator of the communist secret police*) lacks a clear ideological grounding. In Slovakia, the Social Democrat-led government (of former Communists) of the recently resigned PM Fico exhibited a strange mixture of distributionalist economic policies, reminiscent of the old communist regime, and ties with oligarchic business leaders. Yet, Fico has also been quick to present himself during the migration crisis as a defender of a Christian Slovakia, and (together with the Czech and Hungarian governments²⁵) did not ratify the Istanbul Convention because of its definition of marriage, which the Slovak Constitution defines as between a man and a woman.

[1523050206?emailToken=967aec542bd082c56ef1cf8b6ca2c6f5bK0%2Fdu9JSUEktXgwX8d8BYMhbIma xQC07zC%2F8a7eOg0dxgQw1hIGN0NWL%2FAFvDI7w7dVT98Dc%2FxFRqg90ZaW10A%3D%3D](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/10046562/Edmund-Burke-the-great-conservative-who-foresaw-the-discontents-of-our-era.html)

²¹ Scruton, Roger (2015). *How to be a Conservative*; Bloomsbury London

²² Norman, Jesse (2013). ‘Edmund Burke – The great conservative who foresaw the discontents of our era’; *The Telegraph* (Accessed 28/03/2018) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/10046562/Edmund-Burke-the-great-conservative-who-foresaw-the-discontents-of-our-era.html>

²³ Scruton (2015) p21

²⁴ Scruton (2015) p124

²⁵ The Poland government the Convention in 2015

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

In 2014, Viktor Orban promised to build in Hungary an ‘illiberal state’²⁶ that does not reject rights of the individual, but stresses individual responsibility, family values and the state’s overall competitiveness and security²⁷. In theory, at least, Orban did not reject the founding principles of the liberal state per se, but rather the hyper-liberal²⁸ narrative which dominates the discourse on liberal democracy, and whose focus on individual rights and disregard for individual responsibility is making the liberal state increasingly uncompetitive. Somewhat similarly in Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the governing Law and Justice Party (PiS) called for a counter-revolution that will lead to a reform of the EU, including its structures, decision-making and the return of powers to the Member States.²⁹ The preservation of national sovereignty and Polish identity is crucial, but there is also a clear connection with the concept of subsidiarity (originally found in the social teaching of the Catholic Church), and thus bring questions of political decision-making as close to the local level as possible.

At home, in the same way as Orban’s Fidesz government, PiS sees itself as the protector of national customs, the family and of Catholic values³⁰ against today’s hyper-liberalism as well as the continued legacy of 40 years of communism. In this regard, PiS also represents the Romantic tradition of Polish nationalist thought which sees Poland (through its turbulent history) as the Christ of nations, sacrificing itself and defending Europe and the Christendom against the barbarian other – much in the same way as Orban’s government sought to portray its position in the context of the migrant and refugee crisis.

According to Kaczyński, such Polish and Hungarian policies will point the EU ‘in the right direction’³¹. The only problem is that, with the exception of Poland, there is little evidence in the V4 governments have an ideological direction, let alone that this direction is politically conservative. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, despite isolated examples, there is a general absence or even attempts at a conservative agenda by the respective governments,

²⁶ To quote Orban (2014): ‘what we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom...but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation’. See <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

²⁷ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp (Accessed 28/03/2018) <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

²⁸ Gray, John (2018). ‘The problem of hyper-liberalism’; The Times Literary Supplement (Accessed 27/03/2018) <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/john-gray-hyper-liberalism-liberty/>

²⁹ Buckley, Neil & Foy, Henry (2016). ‘The Visegrad four: Brussels’ eastern critics’; *The Financial Times* (Accessed 28/03/2018) <https://www.ft.com/content/e825f7f4-74a3-11e6-bf48-b372cdb1043a>

³⁰ Interestingly, PiS has sought to combine its socially-conservative agenda with distributionist left-wing economic policies, exemplified in the 500+ scheme. According to the scheme families receive 500 zlotys for every child after the first. Also see <https://www.ft.com/content/89fa3a0c-e70b-11e6-967b-c88452263daf>

³¹ Wrobel, Aleksandra (2018). ‘Kaczyński: Hungary will point Europe in the right direction’; Politico (Accessed 6/4/2018) <https://www.politico.eu/article/kaczynski-hungary-will-point-europe-in-right-direction/>

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

while in Hungary the agenda continues to be driven top-down from the government, narrowing the space for civil society’s organic growth.

Instead, the V4 can be increasingly seen as countries united against policies and trends that are not in line with their interests, rather than standing for specific principles. In the recent years, only in the case of Poland do we witness a more thorough attempt at developing a wider domestic political agenda along conservative principles, but also with own peculiarities and negations.

On the European level, the V4’s inability to provide or to communicate a clear vision has led to criticism of the EU and its policies without being capable of providing an alternative³². In this context, the V4 and, in particular, Polish and Hungarian governments have attacked the ‘Brussels bureaucrats’³³, firmly opposed uncontrolled migration from outside the EU, and placed themselves against perceived degeneracy of Western European liberalism³⁴, but without offering substantiated ideological alternatives. Instead, we witness mixtures of ideological traits and a blurring of political concepts. Ironically, polls conducted by the International Republican Institute³⁵ in the V4 countries show that 40% of Czechs (one of the most atheist societies in Europe) and 42% of Poles think that the EU is pushing them to abandon traditional values, while 52% of Hungarians (still one of the most pro-EU countries among EU-28) and 57% of Slovaks want the European project rethought. Thus, while the citizens of the four countries pro-Europeanism, they are not satisfied with the current direction of the Union. At the same time, the governments of the four countries, despite popular support for EU reform, are unable to provide a clear narrative let alone an ideological direction of those reforms.

Moreover, the V4 have shown throughout the past quarter of a century, rather than an ideological alliance, the regional cooperation is merely a format for amplifying national interests, as in the case of the Single Market³⁶. To this end, the Czech Republic and Slovakia often see Hungary and Poland as awkward partners, preferring a more pragmatic approach to dealing with other EU Member States, and demonstrating further that the V4 is more a part-time alliance of interests (when they happen to collide) rather than of ideological, let alone conservative partners. To this end, it continues to be unrealistic, and unhelpful for scholarly analysis, to see the V4

³² Janulewicz, Lukasz & Merheim-Eyre, Igor (2016). ‘All quiet on the eastern front: The silent death of Visegrad vision for EU reform’; *Visegrad Insight* (Accessed 28/03/2018) <http://visegradinsight.eu/all-quiet-on-the-eastern-front/>

³³ Schmitt, Caroline (2017); ‘Hungary ready to fight European Commission’; *Deutsche Welle* (Accessed 28/03/2018) <http://www.dw.com/en/hungary-ready-to-fight-european-commission/a-40805133>

³⁴ Cohen, Roger (2018). ‘How democracy became the enemy’; *The New York Times* (Accessed 6/4/2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/opinion/sunday/orban-hungary-kaczynski-poland.html>

³⁵ ‘Visegrad Four polls reveal vulnerabilities to Russian influence’ (Accessed 20/03/2018) <http://www.iri.org/resource/visegrad-four-poll-reveals-vulnerabilities-russian-influence>

³⁶ Janulewicz, Lukasz & Merheim-Eyre, Igor (2017). ‘Brexit and the Visegrad countries: Challenge or an opportunity waiting to be discovered?’ (Accessed 20/03/2018) <http://visegradinsight.eu/brexit-and-the-visegrad-countries/>

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

beyond the scope of the countries’ own ambitions, interests or domestic possibilities. To this end, the V4 remains, at best, a part-time alliance.

Conclusion

As this paper sought to show, despite calls within the V4 for an ‘illiberal state, ‘Budapest in Warsaw’ or ‘cultural counter-revolution’, such phrases remain largely empty, and devoid of conservatism; they are less about standing up for principles, and more about standing against something or someone. Furthermore, while Victor Orban claimed that ‘the black sheep will become the flock’³⁷ and other dissident voices in the EU will join the V4, empirical evidence shows that even the willingness of the V4 to mobilise remains limited, and unable to shape a new narrative.

The V4 remains, at best, a part-time reactionary alliance, unable to shape a clear ideological narrative, and uniting only when their interests happen to meet rather than seeking to provide a political vision for the region or the European Union (EU). The four governments (to some extent, with the exception of Poland) do not demonstrate ideological traits in the conservative tradition. To what extent, however, conservatism remains at all possible in Central Europe is a subject of further discussions.

³⁷ ‘Viktor Orbán’s presentation at the 27h Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp’ (Accessed 25/03/2018) <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/viktor-orban-s-presentation-at-the-27h-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp>

The role of regional cooperation: a conservative coalition in the EU?

By Veronika Józwiak

The role of regional cooperation in Polish foreign policy

Multilateral cooperation in Central Europe has become an important element of Polish European policy. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Jacek Czaputowicz, stressed in his information on Polish foreign policy tasks for 2018, the further development of regional cooperation is one of Poland's main priorities – not only with regard to security and infrastructure, but also on issues on the EU agenda, like the next Multiannual Financial Framework and the region's representation in EU decision-making structures.³⁸

The Visegrad Group remains at the core of Poland's regional cooperation. In the last two years the government's aim has been to make the V4 play a distinct role in pursuing Polish interests in the European Union, including strengthening Poland's voice in the debate on the reform and the future shape of the EU. In other words, the V4 has been serving the government mainly as an instrument of gaining partners from the region for its European policy concept. It is a vision of an "EU of sovereign nation states" – a community limiting its functioning to its main achievements, including the Schengen area, the Single Market and the four fundamental freedoms. Poland also needs supporters in its dispute with the European Commission in the procedure under Article 7 TEU, although the V4 countries, except for Hungary, have not made any firm statements on a veto in case of voting on sanctions in the Council of the EU.

In practice, V4 cooperation works as a platform for consultations on specific issues from the EU agenda. Polish goals related to the V4 were determined in 2016-2017 by the Polish presidency of the Visegrad Group in 2017. The Single Market, the digital single market, innovation and cohesion policy, and the review of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 were the issues most often raised by Poland in this period. In the area of security, the main goal of Poland was to get support from V4 partners in implementing the most important decisions of the 2016 NATO summit hosted in Warsaw.

Despite different views on particular questions, the V4 managed to present a common vision on the future of EU at the Rome summit marking the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Treaties. In response to the French initiative to deepen political integration around the euro zone, the V4 countries underlined in their declaration the unity of the EU as a basic principle. At the same time, they did not exclude the possibility of establishing enhanced cooperation between some of the Member States, if it

³⁸ *Information of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on Polish foreign policy tasks in 2018*, https://www.msz.gov.pl/en/p/msz_en/ministry/minister/speeches/information_of_the_minister_of_foreign_affairs_on_polish_foreign_policy_tasks_in_2018.

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

remains open to all EU members. Overall, Poland, despite its attempts, has not managed to effectively influence the debate on the future of European integration, as the V4 proposals were rather vague and did not reflect the Polish perspective.

Poland has been engaged in promoting regional infrastructural and energy projects on the north-south axis for the last fifteen years, however, improving cohesion has been formulated by Poland in the last two years as one of the main goals of the Three Seas Initiative (TSI). In July 2017, Warsaw hosted the second TSI summit with the participation of the President of the United States, Donald Trump. Among the V4 countries, Slovakia and Hungary were represented by their presidents, while the Czech Republic was represented by the chairman of its parliament. Poland’s V4 partners showed moderate interest in this initiative. This can also be explained by the fact that apart from the declaration of creating a business forum and tightening energy cooperation with the US, the summit did not bring tangible results.

From the perspective of Poland, the TSI is focused on eliminating development inequalities between the eastern and western part of the European Union. It is meant to be based on EU instruments and strategies, and does not intend to be a political project. The TSI may also be effective in eradicating protectionist concepts and regulations that limit economic freedom, as the 12 EU Member States, which participate in this initiative are very much attached to the idea of the Single Market.

Due to the divergent perception of military threats by Poland and other V4 countries, the Bucharest Nine (B9), with the participation of the V4, the Baltic states, Romania and Bulgaria, has become an important format within NATO for Poland. None of the few meetings of foreign and defence ministers of the B9 brought new declarations regarding the strengthening of these countries’ involvement on the Eastern flank of the alliance. However, Poland’s aim is to hold regular consultations with regional partners and strengthen their self-perception as part of the Eastern flank. In this regard Romania, which has a similar approach to Russia, is becoming an ever more valuable ally for Poland, apart from the B9 also within the trilateral Polish-Romanian-Turkish consultation format. There is also a Polish intention to open up Central Europe to Scandinavia on security policy and defence industry cooperation.

Central European cooperation seen as a “conservative coalition”

Labelling the V4 as a conservative coalition in the EU mainly serves Hungarian foreign policy interests. It was PM Viktor Orbán who has started to take advantage of the Visegrad Group as an instrument for realizing his ambitions of becoming a leader of a conservative block within the EU. In fact, this narrative is damaging to effective cooperation of regional partners on the EU level, as it makes very difficult to articulate and make heard legitimate concerns Central European Member States – and others – have. There are reasons to have such concerns, e.g. about a Commission-driven PESCO or a German-French dominance in EU decision making.

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

EU Member States that consider Russia a military threat regard PESCO with great scepticism. Poland, which is focused on strengthening collective defence and reforming NATO’s structures, has expressed its concerns about the goals and direction of the initiative’s development most openly. It drew attention to possible negative consequences for NATO, if tensions appear between Western European allies and the US. Meanwhile, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, which identify themselves with the Eastern flank to a lesser extent, welcomed PESCO, as it was a proof of their engagement in enhanced cooperation within the EU.

Poland, through its regional activity, also wants to counteract protectionism and prevent decision-making on the future of the community only by France and Germany. Therefore, Poland opts for more intergovernmentalism and unanimity as a principle. The Polish government's ambition in this context is to represent the interests of medium-sized and small member states of wider Central Europe.

Even if some of the V4 governments have themselves induced tensions with EU institutions and other Member States, the “conservative coalition” or “authoritarian block of states” narrative often serves as a pretext in Western Europe for proving the existence of a natural East-West divide, a core and a periphery. From this perspective, Central Europe is determined to remain the periphery of the EU. It would be extremely harmful, not only for the future of Central European societies, but also for the EU as a whole if this division prevailed in the mainstream way of thinking about the future of Europe. It is of great political, security and economic interest of all Western multilateral institutions to prevent a new lasting political divide within Europe.

While some Western political leaders notice with growing anxiety signs of building a new illiberal state model in some Central European countries, EU institutions are in fact lacking effective instruments to uphold the European Union as a community of values. However, ongoing discussions on the future of the EU create a good moment for making compliance with the rule of law a decisive condition, also in the context of the next EU budget.

The European Commission’s budget proposal for 2021-2027 presented at the beginning of May 2018 reflects a political intention to move forward with political integration. A new instrument of control over Member States would link EU funds to compliance with the rule of law, e.g. the existence of an independent judiciary. Although the debate has only begun, the chances that such a proposal goes through is high, as it can be blocked only by a qualified majority. In consequence, the European Commission will strengthen its position towards the Member states.

Regional cooperation in the EU after Brexit

Regional cooperation is also relevant to debates on how Brexit will affect the political weight of smaller member states. Broader coalition-building within the EU in changing configurations will become a necessity post-Brexit, as

From 'Visegrad Four' to 'Varna Four': The rise and role of regional cooperation in
Central and South Eastern Europe

many smaller MS, especially non-Eurozone members are losing an important partner that was traditionally sceptical about deeper integration.

It might become necessary to consider new countries as political partners for the first time, depending on the individual policy issues. In such circumstances the "conservative" or "illiberal" label is harmful for the V4, as it weakens their ability to engage in such variable coalitions. It also makes it more difficult for Poland to take over the role of the UK and be accepted as a large representative of non-euro countries.

Potential of an emerging conservative coalition in Central Europe? The Czech perspective

By Zuzana Stuchlíková

Introduction

Regional cooperation plays an important role in Czech foreign policy. After the 1989 revolution, other post-communist countries in Central Europe were natural partners for the then-Czechoslovak leaders, as they shared the same historic experience, similar problems adapting to the new geopolitical environment and headed towards the same goal, accession to EU and NATO. Those ambitions were at the core of Visegrad cooperation, founded in 1991. The importance of this regional group peaked by the successful EU enlargement in 2004 and afterwards sharply declined, resorting to sectoral and ad hoc cooperation. New impetus to CEE regional cooperation came in 2015 with two impulses – the migration crisis, that brought the V4 countries together on a political level, and, in the Czech Republic's context, a new Czech government that proclaimed a new approach to Central Europe.

However, the often-repeated emphasis on the existence of various platforms of regional cooperation does not mean that finding content has always been easy nor that the outcomes have always been productive. And, as I argue in this paper, the sole existence of such platforms and their visibility on the EU scene doesn't automatically mean a danger of an emerging new anti-EU coalition or a conservative platform.

Various differences among the Central European states make it impossible to form a lasting coalition, and the developments of the last three years show a severe lack of unity among the Visegrad Four. I therefore argue that while regional cooperation plays an important role in Czech thinking about Central Europe, it is considered only as one of the tools, alongside bilateral relations and membership in international organizations.

The Czech Republic and regional cooperation

After the revolution, then-Czechoslovak president Václav Havel was one of the initiators of Visegrad cooperation in 1991. The early enthusiasm for regional cooperation, however, had soon been overtaken by a more economy-oriented, less ideal-based approach of Václav Klaus. His idea was that of purely economic integration in the form of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), but he was not a supporter of other forms of cooperation which also included political goals, such as Visegrad. However, the importance of the Visegrad cooperation nevertheless reached its height during the accession negotiations with the EU. The successful accession in 2004, however, brought a sharp decline in the relevance of the format. The main goal had been achieved and no immediate new topic was on the horizon. The V4 resorted to ad hoc cooperation in various fields, which remained mostly on the lower, technical level. Political cooperation remained a

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

proclaimed goal but attempts to fill the rhetoric with contents often lagged behind. Even during several crisis, which hit the region and had a theoretical potential to unify the group (such as the 2009 gas crisis or the 2014 annexation of Crimea) different perspectives of the four countries proved too grave to permit the formulation of a united policy. Furthermore, the lack of any institutional background for the cooperation has from the start meant that the political will to open certain topics remained crucial – topics where a consensus is not foreseen do not even become the subject of discussion. This has been lately demonstrated, for example, by the silence of the Czech and Slovak republic on developments in the rule of law monitoring, or on the lack of a V4 position on the sanctions towards Russia.

The refugee wave of 2015 brought a strong political topic which temporarily unified the V4 countries. Opposition to the relocation quotas, which also brought the regional group to the spotlight on the EU level, provided common ground that all four countries were able to agree on. However, the question of quotas also shows that while the countries are able to agree on a “no” position, pro-actively formulating a joint alternative proposals proved to be more challenging.

The politicization of the Visegrad cooperation, however, was not particularly welcomed by the Czech representatives. As the format has become largely a legitimization tool of increasingly controversial Hungarian attitudes towards Brussels, various Czech representatives tried to advocate that the format presented a “regional necessity” for low level cooperation, avoiding any notion of the group being a unified bloc on any other topic but the relocation quotas.

New approach to Central Europe?

The year of 2015 also brought an attempt to relaunch the Czech Central European policy. The government of Bohuslav Sobotka, namely the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek and his deputy, former director of the Institute for International Relations Petr Drulák, claimed that in order to overcome the Cold War division of Europe, relations with the Czech non-V4 neighbours, Germany and Austria, must be significantly strengthened.³⁹ Such approach was embedded in the 2015 “Concept of foreign policy of the Czech Republic” from 2015, which states regional cooperation is indispensable to the Czech Central European policy, explicitly highlighting the Visegrad cooperation as a basic platform, but also calling for an openness to other forms of cooperation, such as the “Austerlitz format”.⁴⁰

Given the importance of Germany as a regional economic partner and EU power, and in a long run poor state of bilateral cooperation with Austria, such step made sense and was not seen as a swift change of direction, but rather as a complimentary measures to the existing formats. The attempts,

³⁹ “‘Antihavlovský diplomat’ Drulák: Méně Británie, více Rakouska”, Daniel Kaiser, *Echo24*, 21. 6. 2014, <https://echo24.cz/a/iEJKG/antihavlovsky-diplomat-drulak-mene-britanie-vice-rakouska> (downloaded 27. 4. 2018).

⁴⁰ “Concept of foreign policy of the Czech Republic”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/policy_planning/concept_of_the_czech_republic_s_foreign.html (downloaded 27. 4. 2018).

however, so far didn’t prove very successful. The Czech-German Strategic Dialogue was launched in 2015, however soon became a hostage of the refugee crisis, where the Czech and German governments stood on an opposing sides of the argument. Relations with Austria, comparably underdeveloped, due to the long term conflicts over the Czech nuclear programs, were supposed to be restarted by the initiative called the “Austerlitz (or Slavkov) cooperation”. The initiative brought together Czechia, Austria and Slovakia and has aimed at enhancing the infrastructure connections between the countries and strengthening the cross-border cooperation. While there has been a lot written about the cooperation being a regional competition for the Visegrad Four, the very limited results of the first three years have shown that it was a false alarm. Furthermore, the initial understanding between the three social democratic governments⁴¹ will be tested by the new situation of a right-wing government of Sebastian Kurz in Austria, populist ANO movement in Czechia and a weakened social democrats in Slovakia.

While the launch of the Austerlitz cooperation and the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue has been considered a big success by the Czech diplomacy, another initiative of 2015, the Three Seas Cooperation, on the other hand, had been welcomed with a rather cold approach. The problem, as former Minister of Foreign Affairs mentioned,⁴² is that the setting of the new Croatian/Polish initiative is amplifying the East-West divide in the EU. The lack of the Czech enthusiasm was later confirmed when it was the only of the two states who didn’t send a high representative to the second summit held in Warsaw, where the Three Seas Initiative summit has been visited by US president Donald Trump.⁴³

The potential of a counter Brussels initiative

Central European states are divided on many fronts – politically (openly Illiberal tendencies of the Polish and Hungarian governments), on subjects such as foreign policy (the question of attitudes towards Russia, for example), economic policies (Slovakia is a member of Eurozone), environmental issues (importance of coal for Poland, nuclear power for Czechia). Also, in the recent debate about the social Europe arrangements, the V4 countries found themselves on different sides during the vote on the posted workers directive (CZ and SK voted for the proposal, with HU and PL voting against). This does not mean that there are no topics where the V4 can be a force and present a joint position and suggestion, such as recently proved in the infamous migration debate or on the double standards of food quality, but of the long list of topics, very few would provide the states with common ground.

⁴² „New initiative could trump the Visegrad Group“, Wojciech Przybylski, *Visegrad insight*, 27. 6. 2017, <http://visegradinsight.eu/new-initiative-could-trump-the-visegrad-group/>(downloaded 27. 4. 2018).

⁴³“Factbox - Three Seas Initiative summit in Warsaw”, *Reuters*, 4. 7. 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-poland-usa-trump-factbox/factbox-three-seas-initiative-summit-in-warsaw-idUKKBN19P0U1> (downloaded 27. 4. 2018).

From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The rise and role of regional cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe

The abovementioned difficulties in finding a common purpose and positions in the various formats and platforms makes it difficult to imagine that any coherent alternative to Brussels-led policies could be formed on the basis of Central European regional cooperation. Overlapping formats and slight competition of the platforms is further undermining such a possibility, had it been an intention of any of the actors. Out of the three above mentioned Central European initiatives, the V4, the Three Seas Initiative and the Austerlitz format, the V4 is still the most relevant and visible one, having already 27 years of history and an established name. However, finding a consensus is getting harder as bilateral relations between Poland/Hungary and the EU are heating up.

Conclusion

Increased interest in various formats of regional cooperation in Central Europe will likely not lead to forming a “conservative opposition” in the EU. On the contrary, the existence of competing and overlapping formats is fragmenting the scene and makes it more difficult to form a united position on any topic – as already demonstrated on several issues.

There are obvious differences between the East and the West, new and old member states. But it would be too simplifying to see the old and new member states as two homogenous groups and expect them to speak with a united voice. Therefore there is little need to worry about a rise of any alternative unified platforms within the EU. The lack of reason to panic, however, does not automatically mean there is reason to celebrate. The new platforms have yet to show viable results and the V4 has still not found any positive post-accession agenda. Only a pro-active approach, however, can bring Central Europe to a position where it can positively influence the future development of the EU.

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